NAVIGATING THE PLURALITY OF GENDER IN *CHITRANGADA*
Identity, Alterity and Beyond

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Abstract: The hierarchical binary of the masculine 'self' and the feminine 'other' establishes polarised discrete categories defining a rigid sex-gender system. This paper explores how Rabindranath Tagore's adaptation of *The Mahabharata*'s Chitrangada in his dance drama[1] transformed the character into a warrior princess who dismantles the hierarchical binary of the masculine self and the feminine other by questioning and redefining dominant gender norms. The paper examines how Rituparno Ghosh's adaptation *Chitrangada - the Crowning Wish*[2] reconceptualizing Chitrangada as an androgynous gender non-conforming dancer who undergoes sex reassignment surgery dismantles the binary sex-gender system suggesting a plurality of sex and gender. The paper interrogates how acceptance and celebration of plurality leads to a more progressive society enabling individuals to achieve their potential.

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[1]Rabindranath Tagore, *Swarabitan Vol. 17: Chitrangada*, Kolkata: Vishwabharati, 1936.

[2]Rituparno Ghosh, Director and Performer, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, Shri Venkatesh Films, 2012.

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1. Introduction

Assertion of difference plays a key role in the creation of hierarchical binary of the 'Self' and the 'Other'.[3] Moreover, one's sense of the self and the other, i.e., identity, is an ongoing process, which is created and re-created in liminal spaces. The self is always in the process of negotiation with the other and the related socio-cultural environment. Judith Butler has observed that the creation of gender identities is a dynamic process in which the individual negotiates gender norms prescribed by society and the individual's own intrinsic inclinations.[4] The 'performance' of gender by the individual is not a simple process of the wilful subject choosing his gender like choosing clothes for the day. Nor is the subject the passive medium on which regulatory and prescriptive hegemonic discourses inscribe sex and gender expressions. Rather the subject repeats ritualised gender expressions practiced according to established normative practices. During the reiteration of gender norms the subject can exercise his agency by engaging in a critical revisioning of gender expressions.[5] The character of 'Chitrangada' in the classical epic *The Mahabharata*[6] stands as an exemplary figure when it comes to defining the impact of genderization on one. Adaptations of this character by Rabindranath Tagore in his dance drama *Chitrangada* and Rituparno Ghosh in *Chitrangada: the Crowning Wish* have increased hir[7] agency in critically revisioning normative gender expressions and practices.

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[3]Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Md.: Routledge, 1994, 5.

[4]Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* New York: Routledge, 1993, 94.

[5]Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, x.

[6]*The Mahabharata*, Vol 10, trans. Bibek Debroy, London: Penguin, 2014.

[7]"Hir" is a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun used for an individual whose gender is unknown or who is neither male nor

In *Mahabharata* Chitrangada is the beautiful princess of Manipur, whom Arjun wants to marry. Her father king Chitravahana had made her his successor due to the absence of male heirs. When Arjun asked him for Chitrangada's hand in marriage, he set the condition that Arjun can marry her only if Chitrangada's son will continue Chitravahana's heredity and succeed him as the king of Manipur.[8]

When Rabindranath Tagore adapted the tale of Chitrangada in his dance drama, he presented her as a warrior princess who is biologically female but conditioned by her father to follow masculine gender norms. She obtains a boon from Madan, a God, to adopt feminine gender norms to court Arjun but later reverts back to her original self. She transgresses socially defined boundaries of masculinity and femininity as she explores various gender expressions, finally becoming the embodiment of both masculine and feminine attributes as a warrior princess and Arjun's partner.

In Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, a dance choreographer Rudra plays female characters on stage thus appropriating feminine gender performatives as a man in drag and later undergoes surgeries changing his sex and gender.

This paper examines the problematic of positioning masculinity and femininity as polarised opposites through the analysis of 'Chitrangada' as depicted in the classical text *The Mahabharata* and as represented by Tagore and Ghosh. This paper explores the way in which later adaptations of Chitrangada challenge the dynamics of the dominant self and the subordinate other operating through the hierarchical

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female. It is used when addressing persons who are transgender or gender-queer and who do not want to be addressed as male or female. "The Need for a Gender-Neutral Pronoun," *The Need for a Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog or The Search for a Polite Specific Gender-Neutral Third-Person Singular Pronoun* 2010, <http://genderneutralpronoun. wordpress.com/tag/ze-and-hir/> (11 October 2017).

[8]Ketki N. Pandya, *Tagore's 'Chitra' and Aurobindo's 'Savitri': A Comparative Study* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004, 34.

dichotomy of man and woman, and social constructions of masculinity and femininity in the classical text. There will be an attempt to explore how the merging of these extremities on either end of the gender spectrum create a composite androgynous being. The possibilities of situating the self beyond gender binaries is examined which could pave a way for celebration of plurality of genders.

2. Trans Subjects in the *Mahabharata*

In the *Mahabharata*, both Chitrangada and Shikhandi are examples of biologically female characters who had to adopt masculine gender norms. They were brought up as males by fathers who were desperate for sons. Despite being born with a female body, Shikhandi following her father's will married a woman. In order to consummate her marriage she was transformed into a male by a Yaksha[9] named Sthuna who donate-d his masculinity to her. In the battle of Kurukshetra, Bhishma - the chief advisor of the Kauravas, refused to fight with him categorising him a woman. This enabled Arjuna to use Shikhandi as a shield to incapacitate Bhishma by shooting arrows through him. This helped the Pandavas to win the battle of Kurukshetra. While Chitrangada eventually embraces both feminine and masculine gender norms, Shikhandi adopts the masculine sex and gender. Tagore's adaptation of Chitrangada, too, explores how rigid adherence to social constructions of masculinity and femininity restrict the individual from realizing their complete potential. Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada - the Crowning Wish* takes this argument one step further by questioning the binary sex-gender system through the body of the protagonist Rudra. Rudra transforms his sex and gender by undergoing sex reassignment surgery and decides to live as an androgynous being who cannot be bracketed as a 'man' or 'woman'. Shikhandi is one of the earliest representations of a

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[9]Yakshas are a class of magical shape-shifting nature spirits who rule over treasures hidden in the earth and the roots of trees. "Yaksha: Hindu Mythology," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <https://www.britan nica.com/topic/yaksha> (6 October 2017).

character transitioning from one sex to another. Through this character Vyasa prefigures sex reassignment surgery for transgender people many decades before it became a possibility with advances in medical science. Gender-fluid characters in the *Mahabharata* are a representation of greater flexibility in gender norms envisioned by Vyasa. This becomes clear from the fact that changes in sex and/or gender enable these characters to fulfil important functions in the course of the narrative. Devdutt Pattnaik has pointed out how Indian cultural and religious mythology is replete with examples of characters who transform from one sex and/ or gender to another.[10] The portrayal of such gender-queer characters represent the existence of openness and acceptance of concept of the third sex in the Puranic age. The prescriptive representation of sex and gender as a binary system through hegemonic discourses like that of medical science[11] as well as popular culture feed into the discrimination and stigma meted out to those who do not conform to the polarised stereotypes of masculine and feminine sex and gender. This paper interrogates greater fluidity in categorising sex and gender in different adaptations of Chitrangada and aims to establish the artificiality of a rigid binary system of sex and gender which could bring greater acceptance to a range of gendered behaviour.

3. The Masculine Self and the Feminine Other
"He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other."[12]
Simone de Beauvoir attributed the subordination of women by men to the innate predisposition of human beings towards defining oneself as the essential dominant subject by relegating others to the category of the object and dominating them. Hegemonic patriarchal discourses of sex and gender create the

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[10] Devdutt Pattnaik, "The Discovery or Invention of Queerness" in *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, New Delhi: Zubaan and Penguin Books India, 2014.

[11]Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 1.

[12]Simone de Beauvoir, "The Second Sex," 1949, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm> (26 October 2017).

categories 'man' and 'woman' in which the category 'woman' is defined in relation to the man thus making him the subject while she is relegated to the category of the other. This essentialist hierarchical binary of man and woman is established on the foundation of mind/body dualism. Patriarchal heterosexual gender norms establish the masculine as a noncorporeal phenomenon in the public sphere. The repressed and denied body is projected onto the feminine who is defined as the corporeally embodied Other.[13] Since the body occupies a lower position than the mind in René Descartes' duality, the category woman is defined as the inferior other dominated by the category man who is the superior subject. The categories man and woman are defined in terms of sexual difference as two polarised opposites. Dominant discourses in sciences as well as social sciences prescribing masculine gender roles invested with patriarchal values define man as an active rational normative dominant category with respect to whom the category woman is defined. Woman is defined by passivity, the reproducing body, childbirth and relationship of subservience to the category man. As Genevieve Llyod has summed up succinctly:

> Progress, says Philo, 'is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought … The male is more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to causal activity, for the female is incomplete and in subjection and belongs to the category of the passive rather than the active. So too with the two ingredients which constitute our life-principle, the rational and the irrational; the rational which belongs to mind and reason is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of sense, is of the

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[13]Raia Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy*, London: Routledge, 1999, 125.

feminine. Mind belongs to a genus wholly superior to sense as man is to woman.[14]

Discourses of gender, sexuality and family perpetuated by the state and ideological state apparatuses as well as popular culture establish the heterosexual family unit consisting of polar opposites of the dominant male and the compliant female as a normative template against which to assess anatomical sex, sexual identity and gender expressions of individuals. Those who do not conform to these gender stereotypes are marginalised and labelled as the deviant other.

4. Challenging the Sex-gender Binary: Reclaiming Feminine Subjectivity in Tagore's *Chitrangada*

Chitrangada's tale in the *Mahabharata* is an example of a daughter carrying forward the heredity of her father in the absence of sons by choosing to remain in her paternal home after her marriage and bringing up her son as the successor to the kingdom. Although she falls in love with Arjun and chooses him as her partner, her body and her son Babhruvahana become objects of negotiation and exchange between her father and Arjun in the hetero-patriarchal matrix. The point of view is that of a third person omniscient narrator in which the masculine patriarchal subject occupies the universal subject position. The feminine subjectivity is interpellated[15] through the patriarchal gaze and relegated as the inferior other both dictated by the hetero-patriarchal social system and simultaneously complicit in it. This has been carried out by silencing Chitrangada as a character and presenting her as a dutiful daughter who never

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[14]Genevieve Llyod, "The Divided Soul: Manliness and Effeminacy," in *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1993, 27.

[15]Interpellation is a term used by Louis Althusser to refer to the process by which dominant ideology constitutes the identity of subjects through hegemonic discourse of ideological state apparatuses. Kathryn Woodward, "Concepts of Identity and Difference," in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Kathryn Woodward, London: Sage Publications, 1997, 42.

voices her opinion about her upbringing as a male when she is biologically female and agrees silently to the pact between her father and Arjun about her marriage and possible future son.

When Rabindranath Tagore adapted the tale of Chitrangada, he characterised her as the powerful and assertive princess of Manipur trained in archery and statesmanship in order to carry forward her father's legacy as the ruler and defender of the kingdom. After courting Arjun and being rejected by him, she denounces her talent and skill in archery and statesmanship as masculine and refers to herself as Kurupa - the ugly one. Having internalised the patriarchal male gaze in which femininity and feminine gender expressions are perceived as the inferior other defined against the dominant masculine norms she assesses herself according to the hierarchical duality of masculinity/femininity and Kurupa/Surupa as polarised gender expressions. Surupa is the archetypal beautiful desirable feminine self as defined by patriarchal discourse. She is the embodiment of grace, modesty, passivity, etc. and is represented in terms of the desirable female body and sensuality. These parameters of feminine gender norms construe non-stereotypical feminine gender expressions like rationality and assertiveness as ugly, unfeminine and undesirable - Kurupa. The knowledge/power system operating through the dominant masculinist discourses assesses the transgression of prescribed feminine gender expressions and acquiring masculine attributes by females as an anomaly which devalues her further rather than prizing the manifold talents in one individual. Internalisation of this value system causes Chitrangada to define herself as a 'failure' when rejected by Arjun. She demands patriarchally defined 'feminine' traits of charm and vulnerability from Madan[16] to become Surupa - the stereotypically desirable feminine self in order to captivate Arjun. She requests Madan to give her a boon to break Arjun's vow of celibacy - "Have pity on my misfortune. For one year transform my body into a heavenly priceless treasure."[17]

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[16]In Tagore's *Chitrangada* Madan is the God who facilitates love. He is modeled after Eros, the Greek god of love.

[17]Tagore, *Swarabitan* vol.17: *Chitrangada*, 22. Our translation.

When Arjun breaks his vow of celibacy enchanted by Chitrangada's celestial beauty she becomes conscious of the operation of the patriarchal male gaze. Instead of ignoring her like the previous time he introduces himself and offers everything he has in exchange for her love:

> I am the Pandava Arjun …
> Take my fame
> Take my achievements
> Take over the aim of my life
> Take everything that belongs to me.[18]

This causes her to reflect on the compelling influence of beauty, grace and feminine charm that she had been gifted. She experiences conflict created by the dichotomy of female subjectivity as perceived by the feminine self and as objectified by the patriarchal masculinist gaze as sexualised reproductive body and exclaims: "My enchanted youthfulness is such a curse ... will you [Arjun] build a prison for this mirage?"[19] But determined to pursue Arjun she introduces herself as a "nameless parentless flower of the forest"[20] – a sexualised female body defined by masculinist discourses, and encourages Arjun to address her. She is the active agent who chooses her self-identity and gender identity. Tagore discloses and dismantles the perpetuation of the false duality of the self and the other through the binary of the man as the active normative pursuant and woman as the passive receptive body by overturning it making Chitrangada the assertive protagonist who chooses to pursue Arjun against all odds, embraces a feminine gender expression and courts Arjun successfully. When the kingdom is attacked Arjun is informed by villagers that their protector is the princess Chitrangada who is motherly in her affection and kingly in physical prowess. He valorises her as a person possessing both masculine and feminine qualities:

> She is aggressive, she is dazzling
> Suffused with the simmering fury of thunder.

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[18]Tagore, *Chitrangada*, 25.
[19]Tagore, *Chitrangada,* 26.
[20]Tagore, *Chitrangada*, 26-27.

Not a doormat for anyone's enjoyment,

She has the terrifying allure of a Kshatriya's arm.[21]

Tagore's Chitrangada is represented as a synthesis of both an aggressive and commanding warrior and a graceful and desirable lady. Written and performed in colonial Bengal when women's sphere was strictly demarcated inside the home and their participation in any public pursuit like the nationalist struggle came under heavy scrutiny,[22] Tagore's vision of Chitrangada as a warrior princess is a progressive one. Instead of limiting himself to the popular discourses on gender norms prevalent among the colonial Bengali bhadralok, of masculinity and the feminine ideals, Tagore chose to blur the gender binary by presenting Chitrangada as an androgynous being, a composite whole who is both a Kurupa and a Surupa attributed with feminine as well as masculine traits.

Arjun's appreciation of the many aspects of Chitrangada's personality and gender expression as a brave warrior and protector of her kingdom and a source of motherly love prompt Chitrangada to ask Madan to take back his boon. She reflects that Madan's gift which made her Surupa was not her real self but a deception. By embracing the virtues of Surupa, Chitrangada realises that she is merely adhering to the feminine ideals shaped by the society. She experiences a sense of unease while succumbing to the stereotypes related to women. Chitrangada finds herself more close to the image of the warrior princess rather than being a submissive, docile princess. She comes to terms with her identity as a Kurupa- the undesirable woman. Her sense of being emerges crystal clear when she learns that even Arjun admired the brave Chitrangada. It is at this point that she understands the futility of her transformation. Deconstructing the masculinist category of the feminine other as the corporeal, sexual and reproductive female body, she reclaims

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[21]Tagore, *Chitrangada*, 34.

[22]Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014, 240-241.

and redefines the category 'woman' from the marginal other to the self-defining subject claiming an autonomous self-identity:

    I am not a person you can worship on a pedestal,
    I am not a person you can ignore
        and keep in the background.
    If you keep me beside you during good times and bad,
    Take me as your companion in difficult undertakings,
    You will be able to recognise me.[23]

Chitrangada redefines the position and role of the category woman from the stereotypical mythical idealised mother-goddess or the inferior other to a subject demanding rights and status equal to the category man. Rather than being a signifier of masculinity's other - the sexualised female temptress, Chitrangada's female attendants demand that the female be given equal respect so that she may be the male's companion in all endeavours like the left hand assists the right hand:

    Let women rise and discard coquettish beguiling feminine
        charms
    Let her be respected by men for her formidable inner
        strength which is as strong as young resilient trees which
        grow on mountains
    Let her become the man's companion in his daily work…
    Like the left hand assists the right hand.[24]

Through this new ideal of femininity Tagore establishes a female subjectivity that overturns the binary of the male/female corresponding to the mind/body, nature/culture, rational/emotional and replaces it with one in which woman too enjoy the same privileges as men.

When Chitrangada embraces femininity, it is an emancipatory act which allows her to combine both socially defined masculine and feminine qualities and become an androgynous gender non-conforming person. Tagore deconstructs the masculine/feminine corresponding to the self and other binary by constructing an epistemology in which

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[23]Tagore, *Chitrangada*, 40.
[24]Tagore, *Chitrangada*, 36.

femininity is celebrated as a gender expression momentous in its own right and not as masculinity's other. This toppling of the dominant self-other ideology in the construction of masculinity and femininity was further reinforced by Tagore when he challenged and overturned the gender dynamics of performance by having female performers on stage. At the turn of the nineteenth century when theatre became an instrument of anti-colonial struggle, the bhadralok[25] class of Bengal accepted changes in style and technique in indigenous theatre which were influenced by the West.[26]

Sharply polarised genderization of professions and division of the public and private spheres led to the confinement of women within the home while men were expected to be in the public sphere. Patriarchal anti-colonial rhetoric designated women as bearers of Indian culture who must be protected from the influence of Western culture and never exposed to the public view. This discourse of morality and respectability deprived women from playing an active role in public theatre and the roles of women characters were portrayed by cross-dressed males.[27] The writing, production, staging of plays and acting in plays was under masculine control. Similarly dance as a medium

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[25]Sumanta Banerjee has noted how agents of colonial British rulers like banians, dewans and zamindars set the norms for socio-cultural behaviour in eighteenth century Bengal by virtue of being economically powerful. By the middle of the nineteenth century this class was succeeded by a new community of English educated professionals - teachers, lawyers, civil servants, etc. This community formed the bhadralok class and became the trend-setter for socio-cultural norms in Bengali society. Sumanta Banerjee, "Rabindranath - A Liberal Humanist Fallen among Bigoted Bhadraloks," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 24, (2011): 51.

[26]Minoti Chatterjee, *Theatre beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Bengali Stage, 1905-1947*, New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2004, cited in Soumya Mohan Ghosh, "Theatre of Exclusion: A Select Study of Indian Women Playwrights and Indian Feminist Theatre," Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, IIT(ISM) Dhanbad, 2017, 24-25.

[27]Soumya Mohan Ghosh, "Theatre of Exclusion," 24-25.

was also dominated by the masculine author and instructor as creators of knowledge while the body of the female dancer remained the transmitter of their vision. When Tagore started staging his own dramas from 1881, he challenged the gender dynamics of production and staging by having female actresses on stage. During the staging of Chitrangada in Shantiniketan, Tagore had female dancers perform the role of male characters like Arjun as well as female characters like Chitrangada and her female companions. He gave a free reign to female dancers like Mrinalini Sarabhai playing the role of Chitrangada to choreograph their own dance moves when the play was staged in Shantiniketan. As noted by Prarthana Purakayastha, this allowed the female dancers to write their way into the history of performance art as moving female bodies.[28] This led to the feminisation of an art form which had been imbued with patriarchal values under masculine production and control. However, Tagore keeps the frame of reference of what constitutes masculinity and femininity intact thus playing into the duality of gender expressions of early nineteenth century Bengali bhadralok culture. This is consistent with his target audience of the culturally conscious Bengali middle and upper classes who were classically educated to appreciate the complex language and genre of his dance drama but endorsed rigidly defined patriarchal gender-based values defining masculinity and femininity.

5. Challenging the Binary of Sex-gender: Ghosh's Chitrangada

Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* takes a step further by questioning dominant discourses like that of medical science, psychology and popular culture which recognise and prescribe sex and gender classification into a binary system, and demand that males and females fit neatly into these stereotypes. The protagonist of Ghosh's film *Rudra* is a choreographer staging Tagore's play Chitrangada. He states that "Chitrangada is the

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[28]Prarthana Purakayastha, "Warrior, Untouchable, Courtesan: Fringe Women in Tagore's Dramas" *South Asia Research* 29, no. 3, (2002): 255-273.

story of a wish - that you can choose your gender."[29] Rudra's development of self-identity and gender-identity through a process of conflict created by the patriarchal masculinist gaze and his own self-image about his sex and gender is narrated by juxtaposing it with the film's radical reinterpretation of Tagore's Chitrangada with Madan as a surgeon performing sex reassignment surgery on Chitrangada. The public image of the director Rituparno Ghosh as a celebrity persona who underwent surgical procedures to change his gender to portray gender-queer characters in other films and his role of Rudra served to reiterate Rudra's development of self-identity and gender-identity in the film as a process related to Ghosh's personal life. Like Rituparno Ghosh in real life, Rudra dresses in an androgynous manner increasingly adopting conventionally feminine silhouettes through clothes and accessories like earrings, bracelets, etc. and plays female characters on stage.

Rudra dressing up for performing female characters on stage.[30]

He performs the conventional feminine role in his romantic relationship with Partho. Judging his relationship with Partho through a heterosexual patriarchal lens to be unfulfilled without a child, he decides to undergo a sex reassignment surgery from

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[29]Rituparno Ghosh, Director and Performer, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*, Shri Venkatesh Films, 2012.

[30]*Chitrangada: the Crowning Wish*, Shri Venkatesh Films, 2012.

male to female as that would allow them to meet the criteria for adopting a child. However, Partho does not support this, calls Rudra a 'half-thing' and abandons him half-way through the surgical processes. Instead he chooses to pursue and have a child with Kasturi - a biologically female dancer in Rudra's troupe whom he considers a 'real woman.' Kasturi and Rudra are pitted as rivals for Partho's affection in the romantic triangle.

Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen have contended that Rudra undertaking sex reassignment in *Chitrangada - the Crowning Wish* is an act of Ghosh's gender-queer character appropriating the body of the "biological woman per se" to eliminate the opposition posed by the female rival in the romantic plot of the film.[31] They have traced the conflict between queer characters played by Ghosh and their sexual rivalry with female protagonists in preceding films like *Arekti Premer Golpo* and *Memories in March*. They have interpreted Rudra's appropriation of the biological female body as an effort to eliminate this opposition by becoming biologically female. Rather than an act of appropriation of the biological female body in order to eliminate competition with biologically born females for the male protagonist's affection, Rudra's adoption of femininity both in terms of the biological body and the socially prescribed gender roles is an empowering act which serves to overturn the classic film narrative's dynamics of the active controlling male gaze and passive receptive female body.

Laura Mulvey had observed how woman is the signifier of the male other in the classic narrative films produced in Western culture.[32] She is objectified by the male gaze of the people engaged in making the film like the scriptwriter, director and cameraman as well as the audience who project their fantasies of

[31]Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen, "A Room of Hir Own: The Queer Aesthetics of Rituparno Ghosh," in *Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender and Art*, ed. Sangeeta Dutta, Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta, New York: Routledge, 2016, 216.

[32]Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures: Language, Discourse, Society*, eds., Stephen Heath, Colin McCabe and Denise Riley, New York: Springer, 1989, 27.

woman as a sexual and reproductive body onto her. Rudra's adoption of a feminine persona from a masculine one questions the relegation of femininity as masculinity's other by representing femininity both sexually and as a gender expression to be empowering. A surgically transformed female body would have enabled Rudra to adopt a child and stereotypical feminine gender traits of emotionalism do not detract from his assertive, self-reliant and productive character. The representation of Partho, the stereotypical male partner, as an erratic drug addict who is emotionally abusive and sometimes dependent on Rudra financially reverses the masculine as the subject and the feminine as the object as projected by the masculinist male gaze. Rudra as a person espousing female gender, Kasturi, Mala and Rudra's mother become examples of female characters who carry forward the story while Partho is eventually relegated as nothing more than a stepping stone for Rudra's journey of self-identity and gender identity. The objectification of the feminine as the bearer of erotic fantasy of the masculinist patriarchal gaze of the camera as well audience is prevented by a highly stylised and symbolic representation of Rudra's increasing feminisation through surgical procedures on his body and his changing relationship with Partho in which he plays the conventional feminine role.
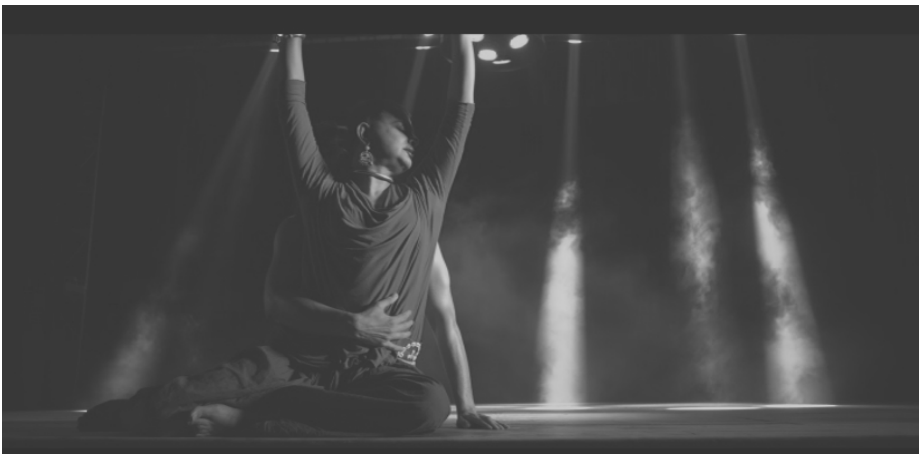
Symbolic representation of Rudra and Partho's relationship.[33]]

The feminine agency is highlighted further in the film through Kasturi's refusal to carry Partho's child. Kasturi is a female character who controls her body and sexuality as a subject and refuses to be objectified or controlled by the patriarchal masculinist gaze like the stereotypical female partners in the romantic plots of mainstream conventional films.

Rudra's negotiation of the expectations of society on the individual and the individual's own sense of self identity is represented eloquently through the photographs in which he sees himself undergoing changes to fit into other people's expectations of how he should be.

Rudra sees himself undergoing surgery in a photograph.[34]

Questioning the rigidity of the binary sex/gender system promoting stereotypical ideals of the active dominant and rational male and passive, receptive and emotional female, Rudra reminds both Partho and the audience that sex and gender identities are dynamic processes negotiated by everyone:

Partho: Admit that you are not happy with what you are naturally.

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[33]*Chitrangada: the Crowning Wish*, Shri Venkatesh Films, 2012.
[34]*Chitrangada: the Crowning Wish*, Shri Venkatesh Films, 2012.

> Rudra: Many of us are not happy with what we are, Partho. Otherwise boys would not be building six packs in gyms everyday in order to become a man. Women would not thread their eyebrows.[35]

Man and woman are discursively created artificial categories which control and police people's experiences of their sex and gender. Since the individual's socialisation and formation of self-identity takes place within pre-existing socio-cultural and discursive matrix of patriarchy and heterosexuality, the individual's performance of gender is not a radical act of creating something new. As Judith Butler has observed, when people "perform"[36] their gender, they negotiate with the existing norms by reorganising or reinterpreting them.[37] Individual agency plays an important part in the creation of self-identity and gender-identity as the individual negotiates with these dominant socio-cultural norms.

When engaging in practices defining one's self-identity and gender-identity individuals have the option of conforming to the established stereotypical categories or they can transform these categories through reimagining them. Rudra faces this dilemma - should he go ahead with the surgeries to become Chitrangada's Surupa - the feminine as objectified by male fantasy or live as a subject in his own right - "a vivacious, energetic, creative, eccentric dancer."[38] Eventually he decides to reverse the surgical procedure. He defies the social norms of a binary gender system and chooses to remain "queer"- a being not defined by sexual difference as masculine or feminine. He presents an alternative sex-gender system in which self-identity is not defined in terms of either/or as a masculine or feminine sex and gender. Recognising that self-identity is a process always in transition, Rudra reaches the conclusion that an individual should have the freedom to define his own sex and gender - "Be what you want

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[35]Ghosh, *Chitrangada*, 2012.

[36]Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 12-13.

[37]Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 40.

[38]Ghosh, *Chitrangada*, 2012.

to be."[39] This is a very strong statement which celebrates the plurality of genders and reminds the audience that categorisation of bodies as male and female is an artificial one. If a person does not fit into any of these categories neatly, then the person does not need to be fixed, it is the categories that need to be reconsidered.

6. Conclusion: Towards a Plurality of Sex and Gender

Judith Butler has observed how sex is a normative category created by discourses of sexual difference which materialize and regulate bodies.[40] Bodies which identify with the binary sex-gender system as a male or female are classified as 'subjects' while those which do not identify form the 'abject'. The abject bodies are the 'others' which differentiate the subject. In real life, transgender persons who choose to live as a member of a different sex than the one they were assigned at birth are examples of abject bodies subjugated and relegated to the margins of society[41] by the dominant sections.

Both Tagore and Ghosh present the confusion of gender and the conflict arising out of it in the protagonist in a positive and empathetic light. Tagore's *Chitrangada* and Ghosh's androgynous dancer Rudra are representations of abject bodies which resist othering and marginalisation by the binary sex-gender system. They challenge the dominant sex-gender norms by rewriting them as subjects. Emphasizing that not only sex and gender but multiple identities define a person, Rudra exclaims - "My dance is not limited by my gender, Partho. And neither is my identity."[42] Through Rudra's refusal to be tied down to his gender Ghosh makes a powerful case for seeing beyond gender categories when defining people.

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[39]Ghosh, *Chitrangada*, 2012.

[40]Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 1.

[41] Cheryl Chase, interviewed by Peter Hogarty, "Intersex Activism, Feminism and Psychology," in *Reader in Cultural Criticism: Queer Theory*, eds. Iain Morland and Annabelle Wilcox, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 73.

[42]Ghosh, *Chitrangada- the Crowning Wish*, 2012.

The plurality of gender in Chitrangada not only challenges the notion of fixed gender-identity but also sensitizes one to the gender conflict in a person who is not hetero-normative. Such representations indeed broaden the perspective of the audience so that they not only tolerate but celebrate diversity in sex and gender. Raising awareness about sex and gender as a spectrum and not absolute polarised opposites will help to reduce the stigma, prejudice and discrimination against sex and gender non-conforming people like transgenders and assimilate them into mainstream society. Greater appreciation and celebration of all the characteristics which make them unique rather than a focus on their sex and gender will enable them to flourish as complete human beings and realize their potential.